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METHOD FOR MONITORING THE OPERATING READINESS OF AT LEAST
ONE MEMORY ELEMENT ASSIGNED TO AN ELECTRONIC UNIT

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to a method for monitoring the operating readiness of at least one memory element that is assigned to an electronic unit, and an electronic unit for 5 executing the method. The present invention also relates to a computer program for executing the method according to the present invention.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

10 Flash EPROMs, for example, are used for the storage of program code in electronic units such as, for example, engine control units. It is also common in modern controllers to integrate flash memory elements to execute programs as quickly as possible. However, the integrated 15 flash memory element is substantially more expensive than an external flash memory IC (integrated circuit) which, however, is slower in comparison with the former. For this reason, external (stand-alone) flash memory ICs are used for program sections which do not affect the performance of the 20 overall system.

This creates the problem that different technologies are used to manufacture the different ICs for the computers and the memories which therefore run on different operating 25 voltages. Even on the computer, depending on the technology, the operating voltages for the computer kernel and the operating voltage of the flash memory may be different.

Generally, the operating voltage of the flash memory is higher than that of the computer kernel. However, program execution is ensured only when the operating voltage for the memory in which the program to be executed is stored and the 5 operating voltage for the computer kernel are within a specified tolerance zone.

Low voltage recognition of the operating voltages and associated error handling are necessary for a supply voltage 10 dip of the engine control unit.

A method and a device for monitoring an electronic computing unit are described in German Patent Application No. DE 196 01 804. In the method described, in the event of an 15 interruption in the supply voltage and following initialization of the computing unit, a reset signal is transmitted from a voltage monitoring device to the computing unit and, after the signal is received, the operating state of the computing unit is checked by 20 comparing a content of a volatile memory cell with a fixedly predefined code. A decision regarding the further control sequence is made based on this check. After triggering a reset signal, the content of a volatile memory cell is compared with a predefined code. Each reset signal thus 25 triggers a check during which a test is made on whether the content of the volatile memory is still completely present. This makes it possible to differentiate between 30 interruptions in the voltage supply which cause errors in the computing unit and such interruptions in the voltage supply which do not cause errors in the computing unit.

Depending on the size of a dip in the supply voltage it may occur that the highest operating voltage is no longer

sufficient for part of the flash memory, but the other
operating voltages for the other parts of the flash memory
and the computer kernel are still within the specified
tolerance. Normal program execution is thus no longer
5 possible under these circumstances because it is assumed
that the entire flash memory must always be available.

A low voltage on the operating voltage is normally detected
via a threshold value using hysteresis. However, a
10 prerequisite for this is that the threshold value is higher
than the memory's minimum operating voltage, but also lower
than the lowest operating voltage caused by interruptions.
Such an analysis is indeed no longer possible when the flash
memory's operating voltage has a very narrow tolerance.

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SUMMARY

An example method according to the present invention may be
used for monitoring the operating readiness of at least one
memory element that is assigned to an electronic unit. The
20 operating readiness of the memory element or memory elements
is checked by monitoring the electronic unit's supply
voltage. The error-free operation of the entire electronic
unit may be ensured in this way.

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The example method according to the present invention may
make it possible in particular to monitor multiple memory
elements, external as well as internal elements, which
require different operating voltages, and makes it also
possible to make an assertion about which of the different
30 memory elements are still operational at a certain supply
voltage.

Instead of monitoring the operating voltage or operating

voltages of the at least one memory element, the supply voltage of the electronic unit, e.g., an engine controller, is thus monitored. This makes it possible to detect the shortfall of the operating voltage at the at least one 5 memory element in a timely manner.

The analysis of the threshold value shortfall, by using a provided computing unit for example, may take place in different ways, depending on the accuracy and response time 10 requirements and also as a function of the overall concept for the engine controller.

One approach provides that the supply voltage is initially divided down. The supply voltage divided down may then be 15 preferably cyclically measured using an analog-digital converter (ADC), for example, cyclically read in (polling) at a general purpose input of the computing unit and/or analyzed at an interrupt input of the electronic computing unit.

20 Another approach provides that the supply voltage is entered into a comparator whose output signal is analyzed for monitoring the supply voltage. The analysis takes place, for example, in that the output signal is cyclically read in 25 (polling) at a general purpose input of the electronic computing unit and/or analyzed at an interrupt input of the electronic computing unit.

30 An embodiment of the present invention provides that the operating voltage of the at least one memory element is additionally monitored.

If, for example, multiple memory elements are provided which

require operating voltages of varying intensity, then, in
the event of detection of a low voltage at one of the memory
elements, the computing unit may only process program code
from memory elements to which an adequate operating voltage
5 is applied. This makes it possible, in a motor vehicle for
example, to continue to ensure a limited functionality
(e.g., at the start). As soon as it is detected that the
operating voltage is in the specified range for all memory
elements or for all parts of a memory element, e.g., of a
10 flash memory element, the entire program code may be re-
utilized.

An example electronic unit according to the present
invention, e.g., an engine control unit, is operated using a
15 certain supply voltage. At least one memory element is
assigned to the unit. Memory elements may be flash memory
elements but also other known memory elements; memory
elements of a different type may also be used. The
electronic unit is designed in such a way that, for
20 monitoring the readiness for operation of the at least one
memory element, monitoring of the electronic unit's supply
voltage is provided.

A suitable device is used for monitoring that, based on the
25 monitored electronic unit's supply voltage, allows the
determination as to which of the memory elements is
operational. The reliable operation of the entire electronic
unit may thus be ensured.

30 The electronic unit preferably has a computing unit, e.g., a
microprocessor or a controller.

An example embodiment of the present invention provides an

analog-digital converter (ADC) for monitoring the supply voltage. An alternative design provides a comparator for monitoring the supply voltage.

5 A design is of course possible in which a comparator as well as an analog-digital converter are provided, so that the different methods for monitoring the supply voltage may be combined in any way to achieve a desired redundancy.

10 An example computer program according to the present invention includes program code means to execute an above-described method. This method is executed on a computer or a suitable computing unit. The computing unit is preferably an electronic computing unit in an electronic unit according to
15 the present invention.

An example computer program product according to the present invention provides that the program code means are stored on a computer readable data medium.

20 It shall be understood that the above-mentioned features and the features which will be explained below are usable not only in the combination cited, but also in other combinations or alone without leaving the scope of the
25 present invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention is illustrated in the drawing based on exemplary embodiments and is explained in greater detail in
30 the following with reference to the drawing.

Figure 1 shows an example embodiment of the electronic unit according to the present invention in a schematic

representation.

Figure 2 shows an example embodiment of the method according to the present invention in a flow chart.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF EXAMPLE EMBODIMENTS

An electronic unit according to an example embodiment of the present invention, an engine control unit 10 in this case, is schematically illustrated in Figure 1. Shown here are an 10 electronic computing unit 12, namely a controller 12, an analog-digital converter (ADC) 14, a comparator 16, a first memory element 18, and a second memory element 20. Memory elements 18 and 20 are flash memory elements 18 and 20 in this case.

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Controller 12 has a general purpose input 22 and an interrupt input 24. The required operating voltage of controller 12 differs from the required operating voltages of first and second memory elements 18 and 20, which in turn 20 require operating voltages of different intensity.

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The supply voltage of engine control unit 10 is used for monitoring the operating readiness of both memory elements 18 and 20. This offers various possibilities. At first, the supply voltage of engine control unit 10 may be divided down, and the supply voltage divided down may then be measured using ADC 14, read in at general purpose input 22 and/or analyzed at interrupt input 24.

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Alternatively or also additionally, the supply voltage may be entered into comparator 16 whose output signal is then preferably cyclically read in at general purpose input 22 for analysis or analyzed at interrupt input 24.

A method according to the present invention is represented in Figure 2 in a flow chart. In a step 30, engine control unit 10 is started up. For monitoring the operating readiness of both memory elements 18 and 20, the supply voltage of engine control unit 10 is monitored in a step 32. 5 If, based on the supply voltage, it is detected that, for example, just first memory element 18 is operational, controller 12 will only read out and process program code from this memory element 18 in a step 34 until the operating voltage of second memory element 20 is also in the specified range again. 10

If monitoring does not yield a value below threshold, then program code from both memory elements 18 and 20 is 15 continued to be processed in a step 36.

A particular advantage of the method according to the present invention lies in the fact that the demands on the supply voltage of engine control unit 10 are lower than on the operating voltages of memory elements 18 and 20 since 20 temporary voltage dips may be bypassed, e.g., at the start of the motor vehicle, in particular when the battery is weak, and/or during operation.